



# The Classification Paradox: Historically Black Colleges' and Universities' Complex Relationship and Inequitable Experiences with the Carnegie Classification System

**Felecia Commodore**

# About the Carnegie Classifications White Papers

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (ACE) partnered in February 2022 to reimagine the future of the Carnegie Classifications. As part of this collaboration, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ACE are working to develop new and refined versions of the classifications that better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education.

An aspect of this work involves learning from experts about key topics that can inform future methodological and data decisions. The Carnegie Classifications White Papers series aims to contribute to the body of knowledge and research about the impact of the historic Basic Classification, areas of consideration for a new Social and Economic Mobility Classification, and the role of classification systems. The analyses and takeaways from these papers provide guidance for potential updates. All released white papers can be found at [carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu](https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu).

Reimagining the Carnegie Classifications is made possible by a cohort of funders that are dedicated to utilizing the classifications to help postsecondary education advance students' social and economic mobility through learner-centered outcomes. Partners include ECMC Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Imaginable Futures, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Mellon Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and Strada Education Foundation, as well as a donor who wishes to remain anonymous.



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Washington, DC 20036

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## Introduction

Higher education in the United States boasts of diverse institutional offerings to students. From community colleges to well-resourced liberal arts institutions, this diverse array of institutions and types has created a system commonly viewed as having a variety of access points for those seeking higher learning. Higher education stakeholders can argue that this diversity is a strong suit of American higher education, but an argument can also be made that this same institutional diversity laid the groundwork for systemic racism and inequities within the higher education system.

These inequities exist through various intersecting systems and practices, such as the Carnegie Classification system. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have and continue to experience the impact of the compounding systemic racism and inequities that occur when the higher education landscape and practices such as the Carnegie Classification system merge. The following discussion, based on interviews with leaders at HBCUs, will unpack how the Carnegie Classification system, despite its initial intent, has created inequitable experiences for HBCUs and produced a striving culture that causes tensions between HBCUs' mission-centered approaches and attaining resource-connected status. Through this discussion, various HBCU stakeholders will identify how the classification system can be changed to better the HBCU sector's experience.

## The Carnegie Classification System and HBCUs

The Carnegie Classification system was initially designed to provide a process to classify institutions. According to the organization, the initial intent was not to ascribe value or prestige to institutions. Though this was the case, the Carnegie Classification system has moved away from its original intent in how it has been perceived over the years. Contemporarily, the system has become a marker of institutional elitism, capacity, and prestige. Due to this contemporary practice, attaining specific status markers in the system—specifically R1 status—increases institutional opportunities to attain resources, capital, partnerships, and investments (Fernández et al. 2022; O'Meara 2007; Taylor and Cantwell 2019).<sup>1</sup> This access is one of the reasons conversations have increased at many schools regarding striving for R2 or R1 status (O'Meara 2007). Though HBCUs are represented in various categories within the Carnegie Classification list, there are currently no HBCUs holding the Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity (R1) classification (see Table 1.1).

There are notably 11 HBCUs that are currently in the R2 classification. Though much national conversation has centered on HBCUs attaining R1 status, a significant number of institutional conversations in the sector discussed attaining R2 status. With 13 HBCUs achieving R2 status over the last 10 years, the R2 status seems to have had the most impact across the HBCU landscape.

As a part of a report produced with the Lumina Foundation, the author interviewed a diverse group of HBCU institutional actors, including STEM faculty, non-STEM faculty, provosts, vice presidents of development, deans, and vice presidents of research. These actors were employed by various HBCU institutional types, including small liberal arts, private, and regional comprehensive universities and institutions classified as Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity (R2).

Participants shared their experiences navigating the Carnegie Classification system within the HBCU context; the challenges of navigating mission and striving goals; and how the classification system has perpetuated inequities. Individual interviews were conducted with participants with questions related to the study's guiding questions. The responses were analyzed to find common themes and ideas from the data. The following report presents the emerging themes, implications, and recommendations for the next steps. More information regarding the methodology and findings can be found in the forthcoming report from the Lumina Foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Carnegie Basic Classification of Doctoral Universities: Very high research activity is abbreviated as R1; Doctoral Universities: High research activity is abbreviated as R2.

## HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES BY CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION (TABLE 1.1)

BASIC CLASSIFICATION	# OF HBCUS
Associate's Colleges High Career & Technical-High Nontraditional	2
Associate's Colleges High Career & Technical-High Traditional	3
Associate's Colleges High Career & Technical-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional	3
Associate's Colleges High Transfer-High Traditional	1
Associate's Colleges Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-High Nontraditional	1
Associate's Colleges Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-High Traditional	1
Baccalaureate Colleges Arts & Sciences Focus	17
Baccalaureate Colleges Diverse Fields	27
Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges Associate's Dominant	1
Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges Mixed Baccalaureate/Associate's	3
Doctoral Universities Doctoral/Professional Universities	3
Doctoral Universities High Research Activity	11
Master's Colleges & Universities Larger Programs	4
Master's Colleges & Universities Medium Programs	10
Master's Colleges & Universities Small Programs	9
Special Focus Four-Year Faith-Related Institutions	1
Special Focus Four-Year Law Schools	2
Special Focus Four-Year Medical Schools & Centers	2

### The (Mis)Fit between Mission and Striving Culture

The striving culture in U.S. higher education has contributed to an environment of institutional and sectoral stratification. HBCUs have experienced negative stereotyping and discriminatory practices within U.S. society and the U.S. higher education ecosystem (Commodore and Njoku 2020; Williams et al. 2019). The Carnegie Classification system is an element of said ecosystem used to perpetuate negative stereotypes of HBCUs rooted in anti-Blackness; justify discriminatory funding practices toward the sector; and ultimately perpetuate inequitable interactions with these institutions (Coaxum 2001; Toldson 2017).

Stakeholders interviewed shared that the discussion and engagement with the Carnegie system produced internal tensions on their campuses, particularly with respect to the pursuit of their institutional mission. The participants at institutions striving for R1 or R2 status acknowledged the structural challenges and tensions that manifested whenever these striving discussions took place.

HBCUs hold a mission of uplift, empowerment, and access to higher learning for students, with many focusing on serving Black communities and other groups disenfranchised from mainstream society. With this central mission, these institutions have been identified as models of success in areas such as intrusive advising, wraparound services for student success, and culturally inclusive and relevant curriculum (Johnson and Winfield 2022; Palmer, Davis, and Maramba 2010; Williams, Russell, and Summerville 2021). Many actors shared that they felt this was the strength of their institutions and where resources should remain focused.

Focusing resources in this area presents challenges when needing resources to bolster the areas of institutional function that align with the research and grant activity expectations of high research activity institutions. More specifically, many faculty felt there was a misalignment between the time and resources needed to achieve research production and grant acquisition goals and resources needed to reach teaching and service loads. A few participants expressed this sentiment in this way:

- “We’re working too hard with our 4/4 loads and our 75 advisees and trying to produce research and grants. And so, unfortunately, we can’t do it all. And this Black skin, this Black soul is always going to go to my students first. I’m always going to put down my own pen if a student needs me.”
- “It’s absolutely incongruent. Absolutely. Because like I said, if the value was placed on research, grants, and publishing, we do that because we are competent faculty. We are also experts in our fields. But we are also human beings who are focused with teaching. ... We’re student-centered, teaching-focused. And so in order for us to teach at the loads that we have, it is just not possible for us to also maintain these standards for this classification.”
- “I have to find the balance because there’s still this university mission that talks about transformation, that speaks to transformation and changing the atmosphere for regions and for global constituencies. And I can’t do that if all my best researchers never touch students.”

It is important to note that participants who expressed these concerns did not find this misalignment to be by happenstance. This phenomenon was instead due to the Carnegie metrics being designed or normed on institutions that were materially different in the aims, mission, and social impact of HBCUs. In essence, the approaches and methodology employed to ascribe R1 and R2 statuses to institutions were designed in a way that disadvantaged several HBCUs from the onset. At the very least, this methodology would force some HBCUs to wrestle between staying true to their mission and social impact identity or assimilating to institutional priorities that may conflict with these identifying qualities to attain the coveted statuses.

## Implications for Institutional Development

Though the Carnegie system does not intend to create stratification and exclusion, participants discussed how the current statuses act as “velvet ropes,” keeping certain institutions from accessing resources and opportunities. This sentiment came from both faculty and development officers. This subtle exclusion occurred in attempts at partnering and attaining grants from funding agencies such as NSF and NIH. Though these HBCUs worked to demonstrate capacity, the lack of classification statuses of R1 and, at times, R2 gave licenses to agencies and potential partners to feel justified in not investing in the institutions. Some participants described these instances this way:

- “...having an R2 status or a strong Carnegie status makes a difference for HBCUs because of credibility. It provides us with a credibility that sometimes those people that are doing funding or development or grant-making don’t see in our institutions for whatever reason.”
- “When I’ve served on NSF grant panels, when other evaluators see that it’s at an HBCU, sometimes there are some questions about that institution, whether they actually have the capacity to do the research.”
- “It can be a little daunting, I would say, because these are measures of legitimacy that are across universities. And sometimes they are used as velvet ropes, being able to get in and out of certain spaces and being afforded opportunities that others may not have. And with our HBCUs who do such vital things in so many different ways, sometimes being cast aside because you’re not an R1.”

These perspectives display how the classification system perpetuates inequities across higher education institutions. Due to these practices and similar practices, HBCU stakeholders want the Carnegie system to examine not only how their design and methodology could be more contextually sensitive, racially conscious, and equity-minded but also consider how they can lead conversations with other actors in the classification system—such as funding agencies—regarding how to avoid using the system to confirm bias and discriminatory practices. In taking these steps and creating methodologies and practices that are more considerate of mission and social impact in relation to research activity for the R1 and R2 statuses, Carnegie can aid in relieving tensions created for HBCUs contemplating attempts to attain these statuses.

## Further Reflections

Though several HBCUs have and continue to shift from their regional comprehensive status to an R2 status, no HBCUs currently hold the coveted R1 status. This statement does not suggest that all HBCUs or institutions should strive to achieve R1 status. Such a statement would reinscribe the false notion that the R1 status indicates a level of institution quality that the other statuses do not. Although this sentiment is false, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that institutions with R1 status often are seen as high quality and high capacity and receive access to many resources. The absence of HBCUs from this classification leaves out a whole institutional sector integral to the U.S. higher education system and achieving educational and racial equity. This sector has already experienced disparate funding and treatment, excluded from opportunities and resources long available to highly privileged institutions. As this practice has continued for multiple decades, the impact has compounded.

It is a commonly shared sentiment that impact is as important—if not more so—than intent. Though the Carnegie Classification system does not intend to do so, it has created challenges in achieving institutional equity across higher education. These inequities are perpetuated through unchecked and unaddressed systemic practices, both directly from the system and within the ecosystem influenced by the system.

Efforts that Carnegie is taking to address inequities are welcomed. Still, these are just the first steps in the HBCU sector having equitable experiences within the system. It takes an ecosystem of change to dismantle the enduring and long-reaching effects of systemic racism. Understanding this and engaging in intentional, strategic action will contribute to a shift away from HBCUs being left knocking at the door when attempting to attain statuses and resources from a system designed without them in mind.

*Felecia Commodore is an associate professor of higher education in the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. Felecia's research focus area is leadership, governance, and administrative practices with a particular focus on HBCUs and MSIs. Felecia's research interests also lie in the role of boards in achieving educational equity; how leadership is exercised, constructed, and viewed in various communities; and the relationship of Black women and leadership. Felecia's research expertise lies in the areas of organizational behavior, organizational decision-making, organizational culture, and how these three areas impact achieving equity. She is the lead author of Black Women College Students: A Guide to Success in Higher Education. She earned her PhD in higher education from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education.*

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